

Water and Culture and the Effluent Society



WATER, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY IN GLOBAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE II

From Friday, June 23, 2017

To Saturday, June 24, 2017

The Mershon Center for International Security Studies

1501 Neil Avenue, Room 120

Columbus, Ohio 43201

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Conference Organizers

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Synopsis

This conference is the second of two, linked international conferences focused on the provision, management, use, and cultural meanings of water and its relationship to patterns of human culture, politics, technology, and socio-economic organization across geographies and chronologies. The conference will focus on two distinct themes: "Cultures of Water" and "The Effluent Society." The **first conference** will take place in mid-May 2016 and focused on the intersecting topics of "Water and Power" and "Controlling Water." Through these four themes our program spans a broad range of vital and interconnected topics posed by "water." The conferences, held at the Mershon Center at the Ohio State University, will be run as workshops with papers distributed in advance to ensure the most productive discussions. Papers will be published either in edited volumes or special issues of environmental history journals.

"Water" constitutes a multi-faceted topic of overwhelming historical and contemporary significance. Water defines every aspect of life: from the ecological to the cultural, religious, social, economic, and political. Without the molecule H₂O, life as we understand it would cease to exist. Water remains at the center of human activity: in irrigation and agriculture; waste and sanitation; drinking and disease; floods and droughts; religious beliefs and practices; fishing and aquaculture; travel and discovery; scientific study; water pollution and conservation; multi-purpose dam building; in the setting of boundaries and borders; politics and economic life; and wars and diplomacy. Water also plays an important symbolic role in works of literature, art, music, and architecture, and it serves as a source of human beauty and spiritual tranquility.

The study of water poses questions that cross boundaries: physical, political, cultural, and disciplinary. It constitutes an ideal theme for collaborative and comparative analysis over a range of methodological perspectives. The two conferences will also extend the scope of the investigation beyond human dimensions to the biosphere as a whole. By bringing together a range of ecological, geographical, chronological, and methodological perspectives, the program addresses pressing issues at the intersection of culture, environment, health, biology, and economy. "Water" recurs as a theme in news, policy, and academic discussion, carrying different meanings and values, many associated with issues of societal survival, resilience, prosperity and conflict. Sometimes it appears as a tool: a means of transportation, an irrigation source, a reservoir, the base of ecosystem services. At other times it lies at the heart of a crisis: a tsunami, a flood, a vehicle of pollution, a vector of disease, a source of international contention or conflict. Its meaning and value change across time and space and vary from one human community to the next.

Water resources—the need for clean and accessible water supplies for drinking, agriculture, and power production—already represents one of the most complicated dilemmas for major parts of the twenty-first century world and promises to grow in importance. The World Water Forum has reported that one in three people across the planet will not have sufficient access to safe water by 2025. As population grows, glaciers melt, and aquifers are depleted, many analysts anticipate that the world will fight more over water than any other resource in future decades. Rationing the world's water will be a foundational ethical question of the twenty-first century.



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Further, oversupply of water – floods – represent a continuing threat to populations even in the economically and technologically advanced regions of the world. The World Commission on Large Dam's estimates that more than 50% of Japan's population is subject to flood risk. Hurricane Katrina provided sharp reminder for Americans of their own exposure to flood risk. Both cases raise issues of the culpability of modern riparian management designed to limit flood risk.

As the world faces the challenges of water usability, supply, and more, human societies' past experience managing water can offer a stimulus to thinking outside the limited array of perspectives that dominate debate today. Two examples are suggestive: Early Modern Japan worked out extraordinarily sophisticated approaches to managing water conflicts that have been suggestive of how to deal with similar issues today, most prominently in the work of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom (Governing the Commons and other work). In other instances, past mechanisms of flood amelioration in Japan and elsewhere involved less ecological impact than reinforced concrete dikes and dams, and today, in Niigata Prefecture, a company has been formed to deploy other traditional techniques of water control to replace concrete structures. Equally important, past experiences can suggest complications to common solutions and approaches to water management that should be avoided or for which compensatory plans require development, especially the need to be alert to unintended environmental and social consequences of narrowly conceived solutions to specific water-related challenges (e.g., the ways in which installing new concrete dikes changes hydraulic characteristics of rivers leading to the collapse of dikes that had long withstood flood ravages in the area south of Niigata City, Japan, in 2004).

Participants:

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